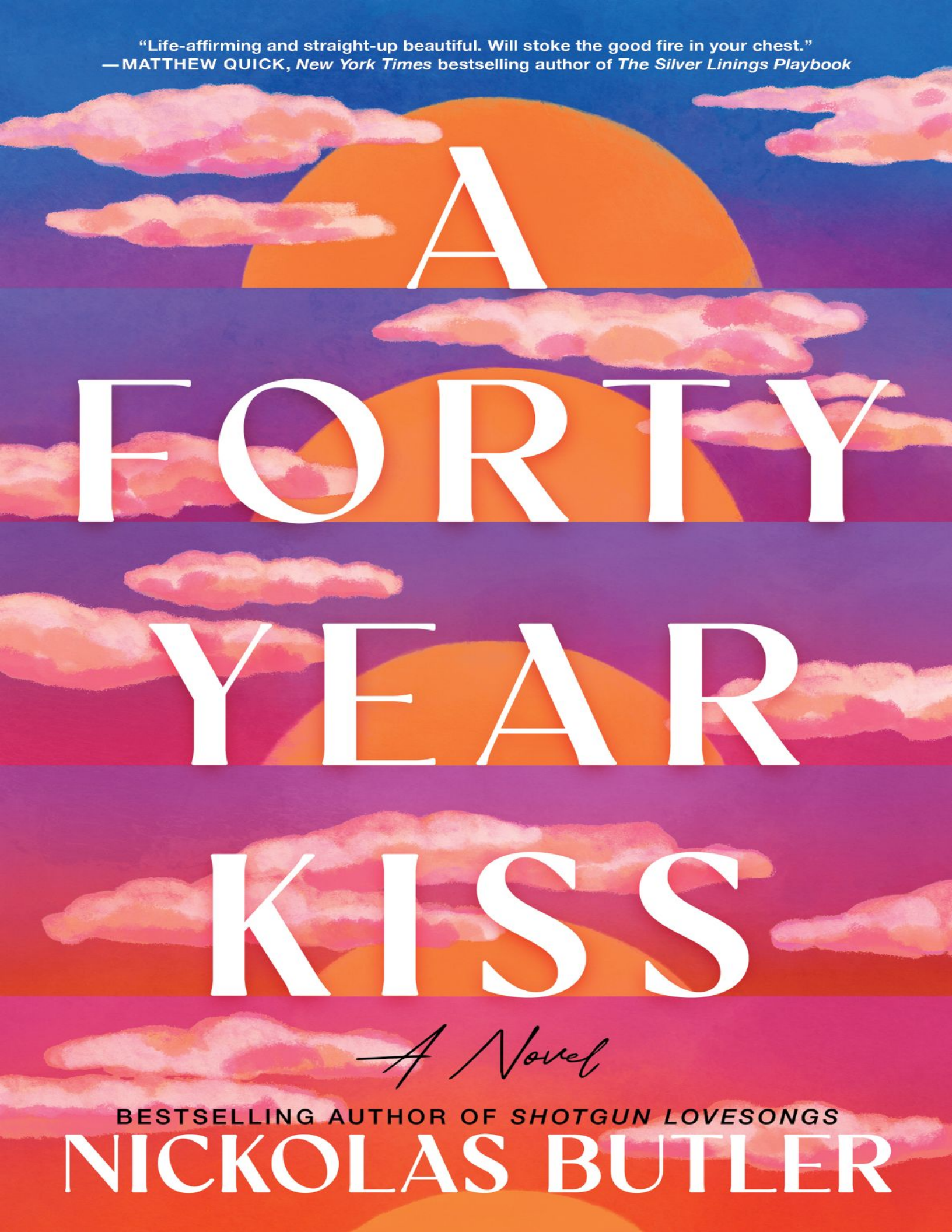


"Life-affirming and straight-up beautiful. Will stoke the good fire in your chest."
—MATTHEW QUICK, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Silver Linings Playbook*



A
FORTY
YEAR
KISS

A Novel

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SHOTGUN LOVESONGS*

NICKOLAS BUTLER

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Also by Nickolas Butler

Shotgun Lovesongs

Beneath the Bonfire

The Hearts of Men

Little Faith

Godspeed

A
FORTY
YEAR
KISS

A Novel

NICKOLAS BUTLER



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For Nora Ephron (1941–2012), the patron saint of love stories

For Tom Waits, the heart of Saturday night

And for Rob McQuilkin

Come let us kiss. This cannot last—

Too late is on its way too soon

And we are going nowhere fast.

from “Variations on an Old Standard” by A.E. Stallings

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Reading Group Guide

A Conversation with the Author

Acknowledgments

About the Author

1

He sat at one corner of the bar, in the pale pink glow of a neon light in the window advertising beer. Not much of an angle to view the television, just the long narrow room before him, just the stretch of the bar, a skyline of backlit bottles, glowing amber or emerald, all of them waiting and beautiful. He was nervous. As nervous as he could recall feeling in years, maybe decades. He'd have to reach back into his memory, all the way to middle school or high school, to some time in his life when he still cared, really cared, what people thought of him. When he still cared about grades and teachers, about his parents' approval. He landed on it now and knew that he hadn't felt this nervous since he was a boy, or maybe just a bit later, as a teenager, when he started to notice girls. When he started to care if a girl found him attractive or witty enough to talk to. Funny, though. Now it wasn't a girl, but a woman. A sixty-four-year-old woman. God, he was nervous.

He wanted to light a cigarette, but that would mean leaving his place at the bar, and it was cold outside. Cold and drizzling. The neon smudged across the slick of the sidewalk, raindrops dripping down the window, down the windows of nearby cars. The smoke of recently discarded cigarettes curled out of the tall plastic outdoor ashtray and lent the scene a kind of dreaminess.

He hadn't imagined returning to this town, this little town, but here he was. Sitting at the rail of the Tomahawk Room on Bridge Street in Chippewa

Falls, Wisconsin. It was only the first day of October, but it felt like winter wanted to arrive early. Like winter was standing on the porch, uninvited, banging loudly on the screen door with one fist, a bottle of whisky all wrapped in a brown paper bag clenched in the other hand. He didn't like that persistent oncoming cold—he didn't care for winter as much these days. It seemed to sink through his clothes, past his skin, and settle right into his bones. But this was Wisconsin. He'd have to toughen up. Buy some warmer clothes. He remembered growing up here, all those early-autumn softball games he'd played without so much as shirtsleeves. All those football games he'd played in winter without even a jacket, his hands pink and raw with the sting of snow and wind. And how as a kid, on a dare, he'd peel off his clothes, right down to his socks and underwear, then fall into the soft new snow to make the shape of a fallen angel. He couldn't do that anymore, he thought; it would kill him. Would seize his heart right up. That kind of cold.

Anyway, he was an hour early. It was silly, he knew, foolish. What if she were to pass by on the street and see him here? It didn't seem likely though. Besides, would she even recognize him now? They'd been married for four years, but that was some forty years ago. Married in '80; divorced in '84. So long ago it felt like a separate life. He tried to imagine where she was right now, in her bathroom, perhaps. Taking a shower or doing her hair. Staring at her own face in the mirror to apply makeup or lipstick. She never needed any of that stuff, he thought, but she wore such things on dates. At least, back then she did.

Three years ago, he became haunted by her. Haunt is a strong word, but that was the only word for it. Haunt. His memories of her. His regrets. Of course, she'd never left his mind, not completely. You can't love someone the way they had loved each other and then just forget, forget everything. But over time, he'd come to think of her less and less until, instead of thinking about her every day or every week, she flitted through his mind maybe once a month, once a year. Then, after decades of not visiting her in his imagination, she was back at the forefront of everything. Like an ache.

After their divorce there were times of anger, and bitterness. Unstable years when he chased other women, even marrying two more of them, both mistakes. Not the women; it wasn't their fault. The mistakes were his, he knew now, with chagrin. He shouldn't have married them. Shouldn't have married anyone. He should have spent time working on himself, going to therapy or something. Living in a monastery, even. But he didn't. Always he'd been lonely, and women seemed to fill that essential loneliness, that quiet loneliness that shadowed his days. God, he loved women. But now he understood that, really, he had only ever truly loved this one woman.

He was nervous. So nervous, he suspected, he was keeping other patrons from filling the stools closest to him as he fidgeted and readjusted, then glanced out the windows and then towards the back door. Like he was looking to score or something. Maybe that was okay, though; okay he was so twitchy. That way there would be a stool for her when she finally walked through that doorway. And they'd have some measure of privacy. This was a small town, after all, and even if he was something of a ghost, unknown to the bartender and patrons, she most likely was not. Maybe she had friends or relatives who stopped off at this bar after work, for happy hour, and they'd recognize her and come over, wondering who he was, this man, looking goofy as a teenager, pie-eyed for her. Lovestruck for Vivian, for Viv.

He'd overdressed, that much was for sure. The weekend before, he'd traveled to Minneapolis and bought new shoes, designer jeans, a black cashmere sweater, and a black blazer. No one in this bar was wearing a blazer. So, he shucked it off. Spread it on the stool beneath him and troubled the salt-and-pepper whiskers of his face, these days mostly salt, and then peered down at the black sweater and gave the cashmere a swipe. Now he moved the blazer to the stool beside him, where he imagined she might sit. Saving her a seat. There. Good. He found himself sighing. Sighing with impatience, with excitement.

He wondered what she looked like. Oh, sure, he'd found her on Facebook. Signed up for an account just because of her, because he wanted to find her.

So, he'd seen her pictures, and to him, she looked beautiful. Still looked beautiful. Just the way she always had. Didn't look like she'd aged a day. Maybe that wasn't quite true, no, he admitted. Forty years had gone under the bridge, no two ways about it, and it was true, he supposed, that she had wrinkles around her eyes and the skin of her throat was not so tight anymore, but then, he had his own share of wrinkles, didn't he, and sagging skin? And scars. Her hair was still red, probably dyed, he figured, but he liked that. She was still trying. Still taking pride in herself. In some of her pictures, she wore chunky red glasses that he thought were cute. He imagined them adorning her bedside table. Readers, probably.

All these things he could see and imagine, but she wasn't there beside him. He couldn't see, for example, what might have been airbrushed for social media. If the pictures were old or even truly hers. He didn't trust anything on the internet. The account he'd found of hers was actually a business. A little business it seemed she owned—Violet Vintage it was called—and he'd searched for the actual brick-and-mortar but...no dice. Anyway, that was how he reached out: a Facebook message of all things. He remembered the minutes and minutes he had strained and stressed over each word in that message before hitting send, and then holding his breath. Days he held his breath. Waiting. Like a pearl diver. And then she replied. He could hardly believe it. Back and forth they messaged, right up until this evening. A few phone calls mixed in for good measure. Even now, he felt like he couldn't quite exhale. Like only she could give him permission to resume breathing.

He realized his fingers were tapping at the bar as if a row of piano keys. His right knee seemed unhinged, too, bouncing like an old spring. He finished the beer he had been ignoring, and the bartender was there in a nonce, asking, Want another?

No, he said quickly. Then, wait. Yeah, sure.

Same thing? the bartender asked. Leinie's?

Yeah, he said.

The bartender set the beer in front of him and turned to the register, added the drink to his tab. He drank the beer quickly and cautioned himself, Don't get drunk now, you fool. Don't overdo it.

It was what broke them up, drinking; led to their divorce. Or one of the things anyway. One of the things that led her to ask for a divorce. God, I was stupid, he thought. Then, don't do it again. Drink this one down but then take a break for Christ's sake. Do not blow this now.

He took another long, delicious drink. The beer was perfectly cold, and he felt the bubbles explode across his tongue, like magic, warming his throat, warming his stomach. It was chilly there at the corner of the bar, near the window. When the door opened, the cold jetted right towards him. And there was a draft from the windows. But it was quiet here. He knew that if he drank too much, he often grew loud. Too boisterous, too excited. No, he'd drink this beer down and then take a glass of water, or even a root beer. There was no shame in ordering a root beer. He finished the beer easily, and said to the bartender, I'm going outside for a smoke, can you watch these two stools?

Those two? the bartender asked.

Yeah, he said, I've got a friend coming soon.

You got it, boss, the bartender said, with a casualness that might have called that friend's arrival into question. Fine—he let it go. Beer sometimes did that to him, he knew. Caused that irritation he had with other men, especially. That itch, that temptation to throw down, to pick a fight. Silly, he knew, immature. This, too, had undone them. He had a temper back then, a bad one, though he hoped all that was behind him now. He was old now, too old to fight. And old enough to know better. Calm down, he said to himself

and quietly, Take a deep breath. That was something his mother always said to him as a child, Charlie, take a deep breath. Good. Now another. And another.

No one smoked anymore, or almost no one smoked anymore, so he stood outside alone on the sidewalk, cupped his hands around a Camel, and drew the hot smoke into his lungs. Toasty. He always liked that word. Especially with cigarettes. Toasty meant comfortable, meant waking up in the morning and dropping two pieces of sourdough bread in the toaster and waiting, and then, spreading butter to melt on that bread, and spreading marmalade over the melted bread and then leaning against a counter, munching, and munching, a hot cup of coffee beside your knuckles... Or the woodstove at deer camp. Waking in the middle of the night, out in the deep, deep woods of northern Wisconsin, and knowing that the fire had gone out in the woodstove, and now, in the complete darkness of that shack, the wind rattling the roof and the windowpanes and the stovepipe, now you'd need to kindle a new fire. Kindle a new fire, and then, as the flames caught and took, you'd stand there and keep feeding; keep feeding until the heat spread across your knees and thighs and the old floor, and you'd crawl back into your down sleeping bag, and then you'd surely know and understand that word—toasty.

He was toasty as could be there, even in the determined drizzle. The neon light was pink and inviting, and traffic went by on Bridge Street in a pleasant blur of rubber tires over rainy asphalt. It was quiet. Ninety percent of the businesses were closed, lights off, doors locked. Even the restaurants in this small town closed early, maintaining strange hours—eleven to three, eleven to two, three to six. That was why they were meeting here, at the bar. The bar stayed open. You could count on it. People here took their drinking seriously; the whole state did. Drink Wisconsibly, they bragged.

He stubbed the cigarette out into a plastic container full of sand and then returned to his stool. No one had moved in. If anything, the bar seemed to be dying down a bit, happy hour droning to a halfway happy close. He held a finger in the air, and the bartender returned.

Can I get a root beer? he asked.

Sure thing, boss, the bartender said.

He looked at his watch and felt his stomach seize and roll. Ten to six. She could be here now, he thought. Or any minute. His bladder twitched, and before the bartender could set a glass in front of him, he all but jogged to the bathroom.

It was quiet in the bathroom. Clean. He tried to pee, but it came haltingly. Frustratingly. He rose up and down on his toes, trying to get something to happen down there, finagle a few drops, but nothing came, which made him all the more anxious. What if she came now? What if, even now, she was standing there in the little entrance, and he wasn't there? Would she even wait? Or was this all she had ever needed? This excuse. That he wasn't there, or that he was late. And here she'd gotten all done up, all dressed up; she'd risked this, chanced this, and now—sure enough. What a deadbeat. Worse yet, he was there and had been for over an hour, but now here he was in the men's room, all but hopping up and down trying to convince his sixty-four-year-old bladder to unclench itself. All the Facebook messages, all the emails, all the texts, and lately, all the telephone calls—all of that maybe for nothing. Because he was waylaid in the bathroom, like an understudy too nervous to take to the stage.

He flushed some water, and even that didn't help, so he just zipped up and washed his hands in the sink and stared at himself in the little mirror. I don't look too bad. That was his first thought. He was whiter now, no denying it. His goatee was white, or mostly white, a few stray black whiskers still hanging on, and the yellow around his lips from a lifetime of cigarettes. But his teeth were good somehow; he'd always had nice straight, long white teeth, nicotine notwithstanding. And his skin was burnished ruddy from all the years on the railroad, all the hours outside. Also, truth be told, a few beers put some color into his cheeks to suggest a certain confidence, a

certain happy roguishness. He still had his hair, or most of it, though that was trending white, too. He wasn't fat either, he thought, as he cinched his belt up, and that was something. He dried off his hands with a piece of paper towel. There was a bowl of red-and-white mints, and he took one, unwrapped it, and immediately crushed it between his teeth. Starlights, that was the name of the mint, a nice name, a nice image. Starlight. He liked this bar. Too bad his best drinking days were in the rearview.

He returned to his stool. The root beer was there, a nice sweat on the glass, but it only made him want to pee again, so he didn't drink more than a sip. It was six o'clock now, and she hadn't shown. Did that mean she wouldn't? He checked his phone. No messages. 6:01, now. He sighed deeply and closed his eyes.

2

She turned the ignition off and just sat there in the old sedan, watching the rain race down the windshield. Her heart was beating rapidly. So rapidly, she closed her eyes and unzipped her jacket to slide a hand over her chest. Concentrated on her breathing. Deep breaths. This doesn't have to mean anything, she thought. This can just be a nice reunion. A drink with a man you once knew in a different life.

You don't have to put too much into this. She had to think of it like that. Like a very small high-school reunion. Dwelling too much on their marriage—all the ways he had frustrated her and eventually broke her heart—that wouldn't do. The secret she still harbored from him, her beloved secret, through all that time...no expectations, she told herself. One drink, maybe two. That's all this is. She opened her eyes, glanced at her reflection in the rearview, and then left the car, rain already beading in her hair. Meeting him like this, she realized, was allowing him as close to the secret as he'd ever been. As close as one misstep in conversation, one detail, one pronoun, one aside that betrayed decades of omission. One drink, she said again, aloud.

Her head was down, focused on the sidewalk, or she would have seen him right there in the window. Sitting there, staring at her. She was walking towards the front door, thinking about the last time she had been to this bar—ages ago. Memories went skittering through her mind—second thoughts, regrets, doubts—all tumbling against one another in a maelstrom of